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Getting out of the Climate Migration Ghetto: Understanding Climate Degradation and Migration as Processes of Social Inequalities

It is unproductive to speak of climate migrants or climate refugees because climate change – or climate degradation, as it is called here – is rarely the sole or exclusive mover of migration. As a rule, there are usually multiple causes – economic, political, ecological, and cultural (Black et al. 2013). The obvious exceptions to this empirical finding are rapid-onset disaster situations, such as earthquakes, nuclear meltdowns, or volcano eruptions. It is also true that mainstream migration research often disregards ecological factors, and most research on migration and climate degradation does not sufficiently contextualize ecological factors interacting with the social world (Terry 2009; cf. Piguet 2013). A further step has to be taken to arrive at a plausible perspective.

Here, the argument is that it is productive to situate migration in the context of climate destruction within the broader hierarchy of social inequalities. As we know, responding to climate destruction depends on the position of agents within a structured hierarchy of power. Simultaneously, the social and the natural world are tightly linked (Faist & Schade 2013). Current climate degradation is to a large extent anthropogenic and thus an endogenous process. In other words, human and thus social behaviour is the ultimate cause of contemporary climate degradation. This is also what is meant when we use the term Anthropocene (Rosa et al. 2015). In other words, climate degradation 'means a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods' (UNFCCC 1992, 3).

It is hard to gauge the effects of the socio-ecological nexus on migration. The results of empirical research so far do not allow for clear and generalizable conclusions on the impact of climate degradation on migration decisions (Kniveton et al. 2008). This is partly due to different conceptual and methodological approaches underpinning these empirical studies, and variations across disciplines. Globally valid prognoses seem to be difficult if not impossible to come by.

What we do know with certainty, however, is that cross-border viz. international migration is only one of several responses to climate and environmental degradation. Many of those who

are affected by adverse climate change either stay and adjust (e.g., farmers), or are stalled in the regions where they live, constituting trapped populations (e.g. many peasants). Of those who leave, most move to larger urban conglomerates in the same country or adjacent countries and are thus internal but not international migrants. In this way they contribute to accelerating urbanization, increasing the burden on cities in the global South (Lustgarten 2020). These movements or trappings increase the social inequalities already existing within and between countries: As is well known from migration research more generally, it is not the poorest and the richest in countries of origin who move across borders but those in the 'middle' (McLeman et al. 2016). In short, climate degradation, and migration associated with it, mostly affects countries in the global South, although some countries in the global North already experience the beginnings of migration (e.g. the USA). Also, the poorest inhabitants are usually trapped or move only short distances to urban agglomerations.

The following passages first address the conceptual issue of the nexus of society and ecology, and then move on to consider how immigration countries in the global North deal politically with cross-border migration, including aspects of climate degradation.

Beyond Human Exceptionalism: The Nexus of Society and Ecology

A decisive step has to be taken to overcome the dominant idea, which pervades the social sciences, of human exceptionalism in nature. It is false to assume that humans stand outside and above nature. With respect to changing perceptions of climate degradation, migration needs to be placed in the context of the nexus between social and ecological factors. This means considering ecological factors as integral parts of general social transformations and concomitant social inequalities. One crucial transformation in this case is the change in the modes of organizing economic life in (late) capitalism. Some analysts speak of a 'metabolic rift' (Foster 1999), a phrase that refers to ecological crisis tendencies under capitalism. In his discussion of surplus value in the first volume of *Das Kapital*, Marx concludes that capitalist production can accumulate capital only by undermining the two sources of societal wealth, that is, the earth and the worker (Marx 1962[1867], 528-30). In short, both workers and the earth are exploited and subjugated. By contrast, toward the end of the third volume of *Das Kapital* Marx imagines the future of humanity as one in which exchange with nature is regulated by rational criteria instead of being mastered by blind fate (Marx 1964[1894], 828; see also Marx 1962[1867], 192). Marx held this rift in the interdependent processes of social metabolism to be irreconcilable with any kind of sustainability, and the exploitation of humans paralleling that of the soil. One may plausibly object that Karl Marx was one of the most fer-

vent adherents of economic modernization which has led to large-scale environmental destruction. Nonetheless, his ideas offer a starting point to see the interacting tendencies of exploiting workers and of subjugating nature.

In a similar vein, another founding figure of sociology, Max Weber, declared that industrial society would work 'until the last ton of fossil fuel has burnt to ashes' (van der Pot 1985, 846). However, Marx and Weber still speak of society and ecology as two separate spheres. Instead, it is more useful to consider them as a nexus. Without ecological foundations, social life would simply be impossible, and the organization of social life has an impact on ecological systems.

In a nutshell, it is necessary to liberate the relationship between climate degradation and migration from the climate ghetto and place it squarely in the context of social transformation brought about by the exploitation of workers and the subjugation of nature, i.e. to emphasize the nexus between society and ecology. In other words, climate degradation and its consequences, such as migration, need to be seen in the context of the social question. The social question – the public politicization of social inequalities in the ongoing transformation of our economic and cultural life – is based on the exploitation of humans in an unjust economic system. The ecological question rests on the exploitation of what we call nature by humans. Both phenomena tend to coincide at the present moment and have to be considered together (Faist 2019: chapter 10).

Against this background the main empirical question is: how do politics affect social inequalities in the context of climate degradation? Here, the discussion is restricted to processes found in immigration countries in the global North (see also İçduygu & Göker 2015). Such an analytical sketch helps to bring migration in the context of climate degradation back into broader concerns of inequalities and the social transformation of society.

The Politics of Migration and Inequalities in Immigration States

Regarding access to the territory, membership and concomitant inequalities, the politics of immigration states in the global North revolve around two main axes (Figure 1): First, with respect to the vertical axis, one can differentiate as to whether migrants are economically wanted or not (yes/no) and whether they are culturally welcome (yes/no). Second, as to the horizontal axis, an affirmative answer in the economic and cultural realm (yes) means that immigration policies are relatively liberal; a negative answer (no), however, implies that such policies are more restrictive. Both economic and cultural dimensions are relevant here. First,

economic demand for migrants and the legal status of migrants affect opportunities for migrants to participate in the immigration society and transnationally. Second, socio-cultural recognition is relevant for answering the question which immigrant groups are accepted by the majority society.

Figure 1: Immigration Paradox

Immigration Policies **Migrants are …**	**Expansive** **YES**	**Restrictive** **NO**
Economically wanted ***Welfare Paradox***	Market liberalization: Migrants as human capital; nature as an exploitable resource *Competition State*	De-commodification: Citizens and migrants as bearers of social rights; ecologically ambivalent: Jobs vs. environment *Welfare State*
Culturally welcome ***Liberal Paradox***	Rights Revolution: Human rights and cultural rights for migrants; human right to protection in context of climate degradation *Rule of Law*	Culturalization & securitization: Migration as a threat to allegedly homogeneous cultures; migrants threaten ecological balance all over the world *National State*

The tensions along the economic dimension culminate in the welfare paradox; those along the cultural dimension lead to the liberal paradox. The welfare paradox results from the demands for market liberalization in the competition state (Cerny 1997), and – on the other end of the spectrum – the partial de-coupling of social protection from the labour market (de-commodification; Polanyi 2001 [1944]) and the tight regulation of working conditions in the welfare state, for example, by unionization and collective bargaining. The paradox arises because opening with respect to the transfer of capital – financial, human (migration) and other economic capital – is in strong tension with the political closure against migrants in the welfare state. The welfare state is more restrictive to migration than the competition state

because open borders and thus high numbers and shares of migrants in the workforce would destabilize collective bargaining between employer associations and labor unions, and ultimately create more competition among native and migrant workers. Given a high enough proportion of cheap and docile migrant labor, employers would no longer have any incentive to bargain with workers' representatives.

From the point of view of the competition state, sometimes also called the neo-liberal state, migration in the context of climate degradation is usually associated with a fashionable term, resilience (Faist 2018). It is the resilient migrant who has emerged in policy discourse as the ideal-typical figure fitting the person who adapts to worsening ecological conditions. In the terminology used by the Foresight Report (2011), the resilient migrant who is mobile and preferably entrepreneurial in forging her or his fate in adverse conditions is engaged in 'transformative adaptation', the opposite being mere 'incremental adaptation'. In terms of bio-politics and as a concept of practice, one may interpret the figure of the resilient migrant as the market-liberal incarnation of the contemporary migrant (Bettini 2014). Overall, while the idea of adaptation as proactive agency is useful in a practical sense and borne out by empirical evidence (IPCC 2014), a neo-liberal understanding of the concept of resilience is deeply biased toward blaming the victims (e.g. migrants) and letting negligent governments off the hook for responsibility over bearable living conditions. Nonetheless, from this point of view, resilient migrants in the immigration states contribute to economic development in countries of origin by sending financial remittances (Bettini & Gioli 2016).

While the competition state provides orientation from a market-liberal point of view with respect to allegedly resilient migrants, no such clear-cut advice can be deduced from the principles of the welfare state. There are at least two orientations. The first is to perceive liberal immigration policies as a threat to the domestic working class for the reasons mentioned above. This position borders on restrictionism. The second perspective would recognize many migrants as forced migrants who are compelled to leave their places of origin in proactive response to civil war, droughts, etc. In this latter view forced migrants warrant at least humanitarian protection, in the country of origin or nearby (Betts & Collier 2018) or being received as refugees also in the global North. Whereas the former view borders on the rule-of-law perspective, the latter approaches the view of the national state (Figure 1).

The cultural dimension matters as much as the economic sphere. The liberal paradox illustrates the tensions between the rights revolution since the 1960s and the growing cultural heterogeneity of society on the one hand, and the myth of national homogeneity on the other hand. While the former is an expression of the rule of law, the latter constitutes an expression of the national state. Rule of law in liberal democracies nowadays implies that migrants

have a right to settle after a certain period of legal stay in the country of immigration (Triadafilopoulos 2012, 122). The extension of human rights also applies to a growing number of factors which legitimize application for asylum: in addition to persecution on grounds of social, religious and political membership (Geneva Convention) these may include, for example, sexual orientation (implemented by many states), or – directly relating to our topic – climate degradation (Bierman & Boas 2008). While sexual orientation has entered the list of grounds for asylum in many liberal democracies, climate degradation has not.

From the opposite view, that of the national state, the extension of human rights to migrants counteracts the desire to keep a (albeit alleged) high degree of cultural homogeneity of the respective national community. Migration is therefore to be tightly restricted because specific cultural life styles and even democracy as such could be endangered (e.g. through the import of authoritarian views). Beyond this culturalization, migration is often regarded as a (security) threat to the national community, as evidenced in political debates on 'imported' or 'home-grown terrorism'; hence we can speak of a process of securitization.

Interestingly, both the proponents of principles of the rule of law and those of the national state could speculate that there will be troves of climate refugees in the decades to come. In this way, they sound a similar alarm. Yet the reasoning behind the dire predictions is quite different (Schmidt 2019). Those actors advancing human rights, among them many NGOs, emphasize that it is a fundamental right for each person to live in a secure environment. Their motto could be summarized as: 'We have to protect those adversely affected by climate change'. This discourse appeals to governments in both the global South and the global North to seize measures against climate degradation, the declared goal being to protect people in the regions most affected by the negative impacts of droughts, floods, sea-level rise etc. (e.g. Amnesty International 2019). Quite another discourse can be found among those warning that hordes of climate refugees will seek protection in the rich countries of the global North. Their motto can be summarized in this way: 'We have to protect our countries from excessive immigration'. In this latter view, migration is not only considered a threat to cultural homogeneity but a burden upon the ecological carrying capacity of immigration states. This perspective is thus concerned with migration altering the demography and thus the ecology of a society (cf. Wöhlcke 1999). This argument is closely connected to the fears that overpopulation is a threat to the future of humanity. In the 1960s and 1970s, for example, views like this led to large-scale sterilization campaigns in countries such as India (Gupte 2017).

In general, the logics of the competition state and the rule of law favour a tolerant immigration policy toward (forced) migrants, including those who move in the context of climate deg-

radation. It should be noted, however, that explicit political coalitions between the two camps are rare. Although there are compatibilities – for example, identity politics favoured under the rule of law and a politics of resilience in the competition state – they are otherwise too far removed from each other ideologically. To start with, there is usually a right–left divide. In contrast to these first two positions, the functional logics of the welfare state and the national state favour more restrictive immigration policies. From a welfare state view, it is social rights that reign supreme; from the national state perspective it is the principle of cultural homogeneity. Again, despite similar policy outcomes, political coalitions are unlikely between the rule-of-law and the national state perspectives.

Two cross-cutting coalitions are possible, in principle. The first coalition is between the proponents of the welfare state and those of the rule of law. Yet, although both perspectives are on the left-liberal spectrum, the foregoing discussion suggests that such a comprehensive left-liberal coalition would be hard to put into practice. The second cross-cutting coalition is also difficult to effect, but the positions have remarkable interlocking consequences. This second case suggests that the welfare paradox and the liberal paradox are closely related, as economic divisions along social classes structure the politicization of cultural heterogeneities (although they do not determine these!). Market liberalization goes along with class differences between migrants and reinforces these (e.g. debates on integration most often concern lower-class migrants; Faist 2019: chapter 8), whereas culturalization and securitization politicize such differences along cultural and national lines. Conceiving of market liberalization and culturally oriented securitization together could be interpreted as a renewal of Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic* (1980 [1904]). Politics excludes cultural traditionalists and persons who do not perform well in markets, whereas those with liberal attitudes and strong economic performances are economically wanted and culturally welcome and are thus rewarded.

Conclusion

Understanding the relationship between climate degradation and migration requires moving beyond unproductive concepts such as climate migrants or climate refugees. What needs to be determined in future research is the combination of responses to degradation which encompasses both exit (migration and mobility) and voice (participation of mobile and immobile people in social and political life). The bias of climate migration research and the concomitant neglect of immobility needs to be urgently addressed in order to arrive at a more sober evaluation of the causes, effects and overall dynamics of social transformation, of which climate

degradation is a part. In sum, migration in the context of climate degradation needs to be placed in the general framework of migration politics more generally.

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